

Teaching Some Common Prepositions

By Coleman South

As most English teachers know, prepositions are a problem for most English learners. There are some charts and other guides to use for teaching them, but these include uncommon uses that often confuse students. Aside from that, learning lists of definitions and explanations of uses does not help a student learn how to use the words appropriately.

One difficulty with preposition use stems from the fact that some languages do not use them: They either use word affixes or post-positions. Another problem is the language-specific differences between prepositions-words that are used the same way in some cases but differently in others. For example, the preposition "min" is used in Arabic as *from* is used in English-to indicate one's origins (*I'm from the U.S.*); the receipt of something (*I just got a letter from my mother*); and distance (*Is the mosque a long way from here?*). But Arabic also uses "min" for proximity (The mosque is near from here). In English, this is contradictory: *Near* means *close* to while *from* means *in a direction away*. Another example is the use of "min" with a word that means *a long period of time*. Translating directly to English, an Arabic speaker might say, for example, **"I'm sorry. I should have called you from a long time,"* when he/she means "I should have called you a long time ago."

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, there are nine prepositions most commonly used in English. Listed alphabetically, they are: *at, by, for, from, in, of, on, to, and with*. I will focus on the six that give my students the most difficulty- *in, on, at, to, for, and from*. Even these prepositions have idiomatic and less common uses, but I direct my students' attention to the most common uses for pedagogical purposes. I find it effective to use arrows to illustrate direction and function whenever feasible. I also write the following examples and exceptions on the board.

In, On, and At

In ESL/EFL reading material, these prepositions seem to occur most commonly as indicators of time or location, so I teach them together. For both functions they range from general to specific:

general--(in)---(on)---(at)--> specific

Some examples:

Location: I live in Syria, in Damascus, on Khansa Street, at 1207 Khansa. I am in the classroom, leaning on the table, at the front of the room.

Some common exceptions and variations:

- *I live on* (the side of) *the street* vs. *in the street* (the street is under my feet). In this case, *in* is more specific than *on* because it means *within* the boundaries of the street, while *on* is outside those boundaries.
- *I teach at Damascus University*. This only sometimes *seems* like an exception: Although the University covers a large area, it has a specific location bounded by certain streets.
- *The teacher walked in the room*. Again, this only *seems* like an exception; it really means *into* -an action-not a location.
- *Your letter is in the envelope, or The ring is in the box*. Here the objects fill the containers, so no *on* or *at* is needed-one cannot be more specific.

Time: My father was born *in* 1910, *on* October 17th, *at* 5 PM in the evening; I first traveled abroad *in* 1988, *in* May; You have to take the TOEFL *in* March, *on* Tuesday, the 23rd, at 8 AM; *at* that time; *on* that day; *in* that month, year, decade, or century. Common exceptions:

- *in* (during) *the morning, afternoon, or evening*
- *on the hour* , meaning exactly at 10 o'clock, 4 o'clock, etc.

To, For, and From

These are most commonly used in ESL/EFL texts with indirect objects (IO), and I have found that students get particularly confused between *to* and *for* . I include *from* because it is directionally the opposite of *to* when it introduces an IO and seems to help clarify the difference between *to* and *for*.

To means *in a direction toward* the IO, while *from* means *in a direction away*. These are easy enough to grasp if taught this way, yet I frequently have new students who write sentences such as: *I gave a gift for my brother*. I solve this by teaching them that *for* -when it introduces an IO- means *intention, plan, or purpose*. I illustrate this by saying, "I can buy a gift for you, but I may change my mind and keep it instead of giving it to you." "I can bake a cake for your birthday, but I might eat it before I give it to you." *For* is inside your head, while *to* and *from* are actions in opposite directions related to the IO: *to* -> my brother, *from* <- the store, but *for my mother* (*I'm giving her a gift*).

Too often native-speakers themselves are not conscious of how prepositions are used in English; and as teachers, they assume that students will somehow just assimilate these words in their appropriate uses. But based on my experience, this happens only partially, if at all, with adult learners. In my advanced classes I get students whose command of basic grammar is quite good, who can express themselves with reasonable clarity, but who still use prepositions inappropriately. Worse yet, they use prepositions that imply a meaning quite different from what they intend.

The simple methods I have given here work for my students with only a little drilling and practice. I also use them with advanced students when they have trouble understanding the differences.

It is imperative to consider the native language of our students to identify those specific prepositions that are especially problematic and focus on them in our teaching.

Coleman South wrote this article at the American Language Center in Damascus, Syria. He is currently teaching EFL in Japan at Minnesota State University, Akita.

References

- Celce-Murcia, M., and D. Larsen-Freeman. 1983. The grammar book. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.